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Translating Clergie

Hoogvliet, Margriet

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BOOK REVIEW

Translating *Clergie*: Status, Education, and Salvation in Thirteenth-Century Vernacular Texts. *Claire M. Waters*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. Pp. xiv+289.

Translating "Clergie" is a well-argued book that invites a reconsideration of current ideas about the structure of power relations during the thirteenth century between masters and pupils, clergy and laity, and Latin and vernacular learning. Waters takes up a subject that has unfortunately received little attention in literary history: texts of Christian teaching and, more particularly, the multiple processes of translation and cultural transmission that typified this period. It is highly relevant that she explores the common ground between texts that are generally perceived as belonging to different worlds: vernacular handbooks of religious doctrine and theology, versified sermons, tales of Marian miracles, hagiography, fabliaux, and biblical narratives, mostly in Old French and Anglo-French.

The introduction counts among the most convincing and exciting parts of Waters's book. Here she reflects on the interactive nature of the mediation process between laity and clergy, with a special emphasis on lay people as "active contributor[s] to the process of learning" (6) against the background of the increasingly porous boundaries between the two groups and the common culture shared by them. Although the thirteenth-century vernacular texts under consideration offered basic religious education, they were not intended for disciplining the laity, but rather invited them to actively engage in their own learning process by asking questions about religious subjects, often leading gradually into discussions of more advanced theological issues. Especially thought provoking are the echoes of these processes that Waters identifies in Foucault's thinking about the practice

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of exercise (*askesis*), leading to a self-constitutive instruction (*paraskeue*), and the transformative power of knowledge “to hand.”

The first chapter, “The Face and the Mirror: Teachers and Students in Conversion,” further develops these thoughts based on catechetical and doctrinal texts in a dialogic form, such as the *Dialogue du père et du fils* and Pierre d’Abernon’s *Lumere as lais*. Waters convincingly demonstrates the dynamic connection between (clerical) teacher and (lay) pupil, which inevitably results in “the teacher’s assimilation to his student and vice versa” (46). The goal of the clerical authors of vernacular religious texts was both inclusion of the laity and collaboration with them, while mirroring lay people’s and Christ’s humility.

The following chapter, “Teaching Death: Narrative Assimilation and the Point of Distinction,” is concerned with Latin and vernacular *ars moriendi* texts, and shows the importance of religious teaching in guiding its readers to salvation, rather than inculcating fear of death among them. In these works, the boundaries between the living and the deceased were represented as porous, the latter often appearing after their deaths in order to teach the living what sins to avoid. During the thirteenth century these texts were transferred from a clerical and monastic milieu to the laity, but not without raising concerns about the wider transmission of moral and theological knowledge. Regardless of these doubts, this process resulted in the blurring of yet another boundary, that between *simplices* and *clerici*.

Chapter 3, “Last Among the First: Salvation, Status, and Reversal in *L’Évangile de Nicodème*,” concentrates on the role of the good thief who was crucified to the right side of Christ, as a teacher and as a model of the salvific power of humility. The paths to salvation open to the lowest classes of society and to criminals reappear in chapter 4, “Getting the Riff-raff into Heaven: Jongleurs, Whores, Peasants, and Popular Eschatology.” In a highly original way, Waters moves between comic fabliaux and religious texts. This opening of the often perceived watershed between literary and other texts (religious, biblical, catechetical) should be applauded and deserves wider application. It appears that the *fabliaux* often evoke—in a playful manner—ideas about the religious importance of humility, the spiritual perfection of laypeople (sometimes even the wicked and naïve among them), and the inversion of hierarchies in the sense of “the last who will be first.”

The final chapter, “Queen of the Rabble, Empress of Clerks: Learning Humility in Marian Miracles,” addresses the relevance of vernacular tales about the Virgin for both clerical and lay cultures. These tales, featuring saved sinners, sinning clerics, holy simplicity, and situations of status reversal, allude to theological truths concerning the Incarnation and salvation, in spite of their simple appearances.

Translating "Clergie" is a magnificent and groundbreaking book that deserves admiration for its innovative and original approach. The few points of critique that should be mentioned here do not diminish that positive judgment. First, Waters announces the use of "material texts" as a fundamental part of her approach. When referring to manuscripts, however, the date of creation often goes unmentioned, and younger manuscripts are frequently used in order to sustain an argument for thirteenth-century textual culture (e.g., 99, 101). Furthermore, there seems to be a preference for quoting Anglo-American scholarship, while references to highly relevant French publications by Serge Lusignan (2004), Geneviève Hasenohr (2015), and Paul Bretel (2012) are missing.

The third point is more general and calls for a broader discussion in future research: Can we consider the medieval languages we now call "Anglo-French" and "Old French" as insular and Continental languages, respectively? Waters rightly puts forth a "transnational approach," considering the religious texts as being relevant for "a shared culture that encompasses . . . readers of French on the Continent and in the British Isles" (ix) and proposes to interpret "these works collectively as manifesting shared concerns and interests that are not limited to any one territorial context" (x). In spite of this, a binary division distinguishing "insular French" and "Continental French" underpins Water's argument throughout the book.

It should be questioned if "insular French" was indeed geographically limited to the British Isles and to an insular identity, especially when taking into account the frequent occurrence of cross-Channel exchanges resulting from the international wool trade and the political interests of the English Crown in western France (Calais was English until 1558 and Dieppe until 1435). The ongoing discussions, not devoid of nationalistic prejudices, between British and French scholars about the geographical origin of texts in a language that is now called "insular or Anglo-French" or *anglo-normand* (the discussion about the origin of the *Quatre livres des rois* is a case in point here) suggests that this language was not confined to the British Isles and that it was copied and read in the western parts of present-day France as well. The approaches of modern research should start taking into account the mobility of books, texts, and languages across political and linguistic borders.

Margriet Hoogvliet
University of Groningen